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ABSTRACT

This document is designed to introduce practitioners in the United Kingdom's learning and skills sector to the principles and practice of benchmarking. The first section defines benchmarking and differentiates metric, diagnostic, and process benchmarking. The remainder of the booklet details the following steps of the benchmarking process: (1) get commitment from senior management; (2) appoint a benchmarking coordinator; (3) identify the area to benchmark, and write a project scope; (4) assemble a benchmarking team, and make sure they have the required skills and/or training; (5) use a flowchart to map the process being benchmarked; (6) identify gaps in the process; (7) identify information needs, and draft a questionnaire; (8) identify benchmarking partners; (9) select a code of conduct and agree on the scope of benchmarking with partners; (10) visit partners; (11) analyze the results of the visit to identify practices that can be adapted and adopted; (12) report the findings to staff; (13) develop an action plan; (14) implement the action plan, and continue to communicate with staff; and (15) review the process. Brief overviews of the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme and Learning and Skills Development Agency's benchmarking database are appended, along with an annotated list of useful World Wide Web sites. (MN)

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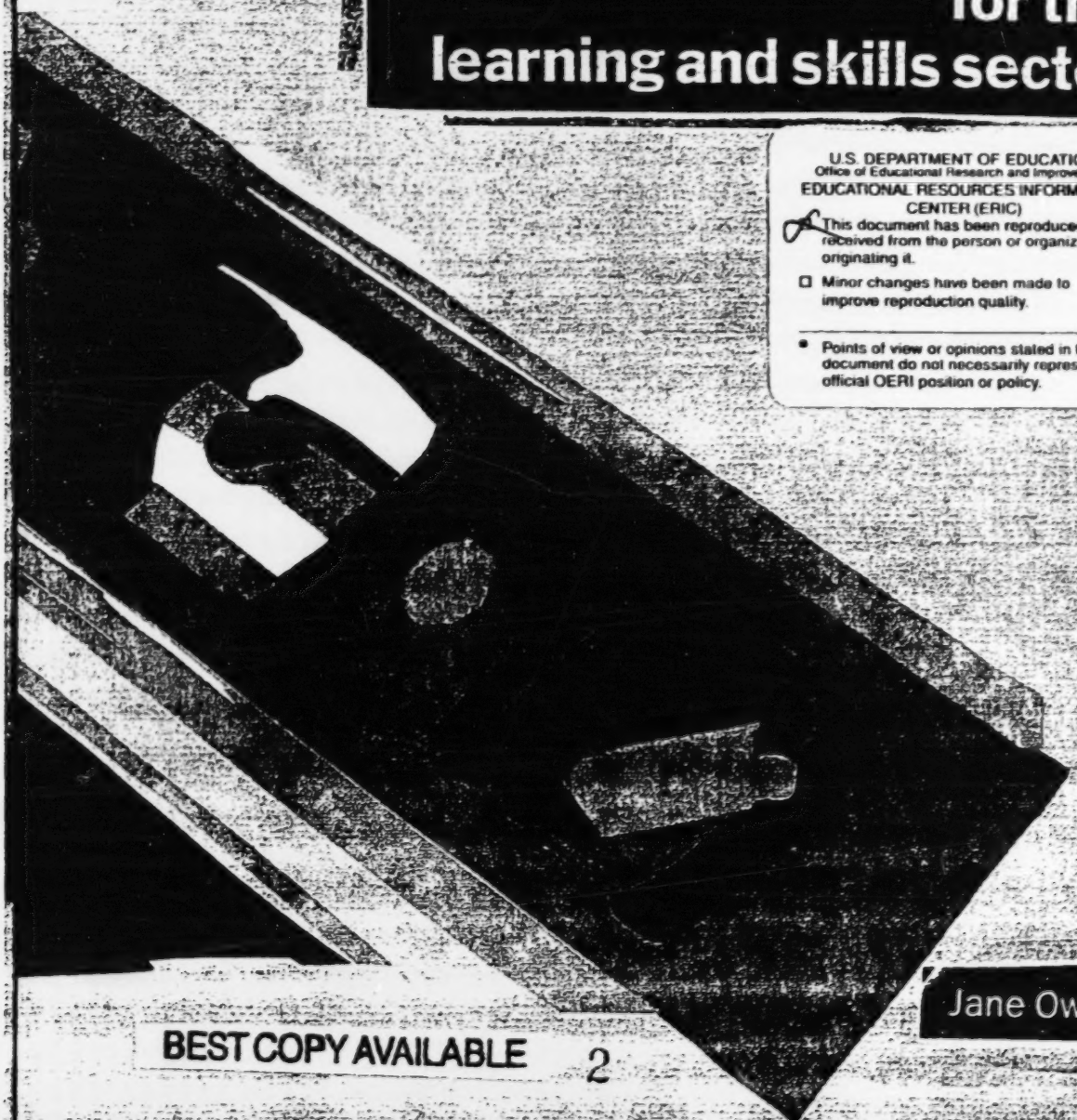

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- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is funded by a grant to the Learning and Skills Development Agency from the Learning and Skills Council.

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benchmarking for the learning and skills sector

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Jane has over 20 years' experience in quality issues across a number of sectors and has specialised in customer and stakeholder feedback. Originally trained as a quality engineer, her work experience includes semiconductor manufacture, telecommunications – as a senior quality engineer – and the service sector, where she was quality manager for both RNID, a national charity, and Circle 33, a major social housing provider.

Jane's qualifications include an MA in Quality Management and Improvement and a Postgraduate Diploma in Change Management.

Introduction

The ongoing emphasis on meeting customers' and stakeholders' needs in education and training means that learning providers continuously have to improve the service they provide. As a result, managers need to use the full range of tools available to them to keep pace with ever-changing requirements.

At LSDA, the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme facilitates and supports this work. One of the strands of the Programme – benchmarking and information – focuses on benchmarking as a method of raising quality and achievement across learning providers. Benchmarking is becoming more widely used across all sectors. It has been used for some time in the commercial sector and is now considered a valuable management tool.

This guide for learning providers (based on *A college guide to benchmarking*, LSDA, 2000, 2001) is an introduction to the principles and practices of benchmarking. It focuses on process benchmarking, but it also gives an overview of the two other main types of benchmarking and explains associated terms.

Additional information on some of the many quality tools available to support benchmarking can be found in *Making quality sense* (LSDA, 2002) by Jane Owen. Copies can be obtained from LSDA Information Services on 020 7927 9148, or can be downloaded from the LSDA website (www.LSDA.org.uk).

What is benchmarking ?

'The art of stealing shamelessly'

Benchmarking is a method of identifying what must be improved in an organisation, finding ways of making those improvements and then implementing the improvements.

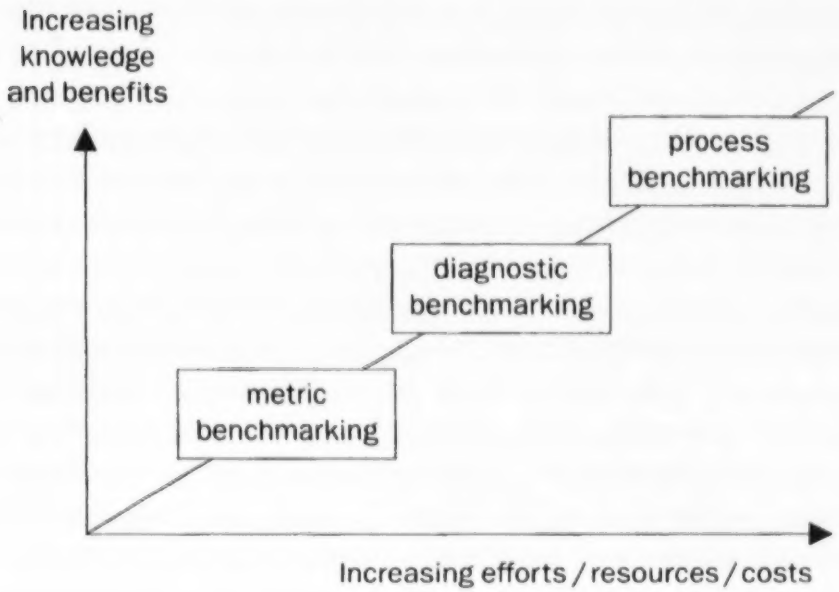
Other organisations' processes are often interesting, but the examination of those processes should have a purpose. Benchmarking is a way of making the most of other people's expertise, of avoiding 'reinventing the wheel' ; it has been described as 'the art of stealing shamelessly'.

Benchmarking has become increasingly sophisticated. What started out as a simple comparison of outputs has now developed into three different methods :

- metric benchmarking
- diagnostic benchmarking
- process benchmarking.

Each of the three main benchmarking techniques has different applications and requires different levels of resources. Generally speaking, the more resource-intensive the method, the more in-depth the information gained.

Diagram showing the relative resources and benefits of different types of benchmarking



Metric benchmarking

Metric benchmarking is a method of comparing outputs from a process. It allows an organisation or a department to establish how outputs from their own processes compare with those of other organisations or departments. Poor outputs, such as poor exam results, should alert people to problems within the system.

The comparison data is often displayed in the form of a table. These tables can display the names of each organisation, to establish who is the best or worst performer (league tables). They can also be anonymised so that each organisation knows how their performance compares with the average or the best and worst, without knowing the names of the other individual organisations concerned. Anonymising results tends to encourage more honest reporting of poor results.

The advantages of metric benchmarking are that:

- once the method of collecting data has been established, it is not a resource-intensive procedure
- the results of a metric benchmarking exercise are numeric and so are relatively easy to use for comparison.

However, there are a number of additional issues to consider.

- The results show how good the outputs are, but do not show what makes them good. Poor results need to be investigated, to identify what caused them.
- If inputs are different in different organisations, then outputs need to be weighted if they are to be genuinely comparative.
- Good results can make organisations complacent. The outputs could be good because the process is good or because the inputs are good.
- It is important for all those taking part in the benchmarking exercise to agree on the methodology.

Examples of metric benchmarking include:

- retention and achievement statistics for the Learning and Skills Council
- school league tables
- hospital waiting times
- the LSDA staff satisfaction project.

Diagnostic benchmarking

Diagnostic benchmarking is a method of comparing how an organisation does business with best practice. It is more in-depth than metric benchmarking. It does not analyse in detail why an organisation is succeeding or failing, but it does highlight strengths and weaknesses of processes within the organisation. This method of benchmarking generally uses a questionnaire to obtain relevant information on the organisation concerned.

PROBE (Promoting Business Excellence) is a family of diagnostic benchmarking tools, developed to give organisations a snapshot of their current state. The PROBE tools currently available are:

- Manufacturing PROBE
- Service PROBE
- Learning PROBE
- Headstart (human resources)
- Contour (the environment)
- a version for small businesses.

Learning PROBE

LSDA has specifically developed Learning PROBE for the learning sector. The tool is readily applicable to organisations throughout the sector, while ensuring full compatibility with the generic version – Service PROBE. It is managed jointly by LSDA and the University of Northumbria at Newcastle Centre for Business Excellence, for the CBI.

Learning PROBE, like Service PROBE, is based on work carried out by Richard Cnase, Aleda Roth and Chris Voss and published as an international service study.

It covers practices and performance across a broad range of issues, including:

- leadership
- service processes
- people
- performance management.

An in-depth questionnaire is completed by a team of staff drawn from a cross-section of departments and a range of levels within the organisational structure. This team reaches a consensus score for each question, with an external facilitator before coming to a final decision, and the results are analysed using a computer program. The results give organisations an indication of their strengths and weaknesses and allow them to compare their performance against that of other organisations.

How does Learning PROBE work?

To take part in Learning PROBE, organisations apply directly to LSDA. Once this is agreed, a coordinator is appointed at the organisation and a multilevel, multifunctional team of approximately eight people is set up.

Choosing the right team is critical. Individuals are appointed for their knowledge of the organisation and their availability and willingness to take part. Only one senior manager per team may participate. The results must be 'owned' by the team, and must reflect the position of the organisation at that time, based on a consensus of opinion from the team.

The team's job is to complete the questionnaire. Each team member reads the questionnaire and attempts to answer all the questions. If there are any questions that individuals simply can't answer, this is not a problem. Team members can collect together any data relevant to their area that may be needed for completion of the questionnaire.

The team meets before the facilitation day, to go through the questionnaire. They check that there is a full and common understanding of the questions, and identify those questions on which there is already a broad consensus, and those on which there is a wide range of scoring.

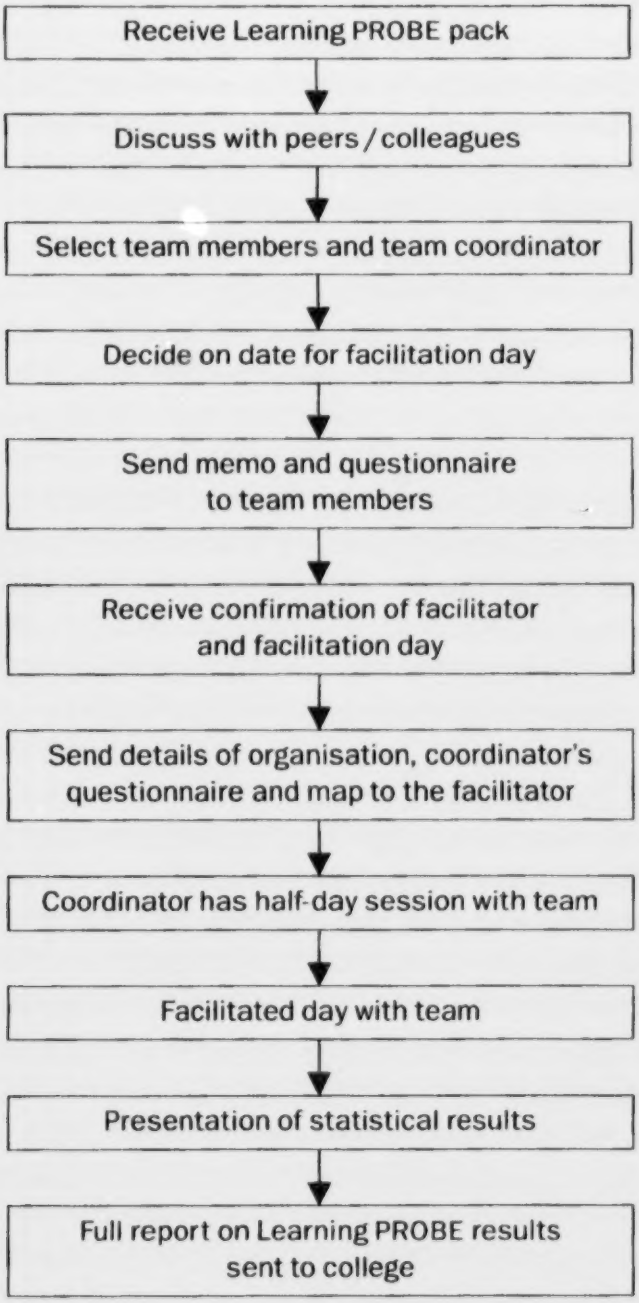
The facilitated session then takes place. It ensures that the quality of data being entered onto the database is consistent and that the team fully understands the questions as applied to their organisation. The facilitators are fully trained and knowledgeable about current best practices and benchmarking processes.

The facilitation day follows a standard format.

- The facilitator is given a short introduction to the organisation (services and functions are explained; a range of personnel are introduced; a tour of the facilities, if appropriate). Then the facilitator meets the team and begins the main facilitated session.
- Each question is discussed, to ensure that it is fully understood and that all participants agree on the final score.
- Once the main session is completed, the facilitator prepares the analysis.
- At the final session of the day, the facilitator reports the initial results to the team.
- The facilitator takes the results away for further analysis, then produces a report that is forwarded to the organisation within two weeks of the facilitation day.
- The report consists of charts showing the statistical results of the session, a summary of the day's discussion, highlighted areas of strength and areas for improvement.

The results of an organisation's Learning PROBE session are confidential. They are not passed on to any third party without the express permission of the participating organisation. Taking part in Learning PROBE is also confidential. Names of participating organisations are not given out without permission.

Summary of Learning PROBE


Receive Learning PROBE pack
Discuss with peers / colleagues
Select team members and team coordinator
Decide on date for facilitation day
Send memo and questionnaire to team members
Receive confirmation of facilitator and facilitation day
Send details of organisation, coordinator's questionnaire and map to the facilitator
Coordinator has half-day session with team
Facilitated day with team
Presentation of statistical results
Full report on Learning PROBE results sent to college

Process benchmarking

Process benchmarking is a systematic method of improvement that uses others' good practice and learning to improve your own processes. It can be used as a way of improving any process – from ordering paperclips to recruiting staff.

Process benchmarking requires an organisation to understand fully its processes and its customers' and stakeholders' needs. From that point it is possible to identify gaps between needs and performance. Once an organisation knows **what** to improve, it can use the knowledge and experience of the organisations it is benchmarking with – its benchmarking partners – to identify better ways of working.

Benchmarking partnerships are meant to be a two-way learning experience. You learn from your partners and they, hopefully, will learn from you.

Process benchmarking can be:

- **internal** learning from other departments within your organisation – for example, a regional office learning from a central department
- **sector-specific** learning from organisations that are in a similar area of work to you – for example, a general further education college learning from a sixth form college, or a college learning from a work-based learning provider
- **generic** learning from organisations that may operate in a totally different area – for example, a learning provider learning from a travel organisation.

'Industrial tourism': visiting new places, meeting interesting people and coming home with attractive but impractical souvenirs.

Process benchmarking is about more than just comparing performances.

It is not benchmarking unless that comparison **leads to improvement**.

- It is not **just** about re-engineering your processes.
- Though benchmarking does involve looking at your own processes, it also involves **learning from others**: from their experiences, their improvements and their mistakes.
- It is not an exercise in 'industrial tourism'.

Process benchmarking steps

Four vital requirements

There are four vital requirements that must be in place before you start any benchmarking project.

- **Strong commitment from senior management** to act on the findings of the project. It is important for larger organisations to identify a suitable champion at a senior level. This person should be a key manager, who can make sure that benchmarking projects reflect organisation-wide strategy and planning and that there are adequate resources for the work.
- **Support for the staff taking part in the project**, including training and resources. Training in quality tools is particularly useful, for example brainstorming, flowcharting, cause and effect diagrams and Pareto analysis. Appoint a benchmarking coordinator to liaise with the benchmarking champion and to record the results of benchmarking projects across the organisation. The coordinator can minimise duplication of effort by having access to all available resources and ensuring that 'paralysis by analysis' does not develop as a result of overenthusiasm. The coordinator must be updated on benchmarking projects that are taking place throughout the organisation, including resultant improvements to processes. Supporting staff involves considerable advance planning, especially in smaller learning provider organisations.

To ensure that there is no duplication of effort – and that benchmarking projects reflect the corporate goals of the organisation – it is a good idea either to appoint a benchmarking steering team or to assign responsibility for overseeing benchmarking to a senior manager.

- **Authorisation** for staff to develop, pilot and implement new practices, as appropriate.
- **Agreed time off** from their normal duties for those staff taking part. Ensure that there are arrangements in place to cover staff when they are working on the project.

Though all of these requirements are important, the first is essential. Without genuine management commitment to follow the project through, it cannot succeed. If you are not convinced that you have management support, then your first task will be to secure it. Indeed, if benchmarking is to become an integral part of the management and improvement process, it must be coordinated at a strategic level.

A benchmarking project cannot succeed without genuine management commitment to follow it through.

Deciding what to benchmark

It is important to be focused when deciding what to benchmark. Before you decide to benchmark sizeable chunks of your processes, consider the:

- resources available to you
- experience of staff involved
- size of the problem (if known)
- importance of the process.

One of the most common reasons for failure in a benchmarking project is that the subject area is too nebulous. Once people realise the benefits of benchmarking, it is easy for them to get carried away and to overstretch themselves. For example, a common area identified for benchmarking is 'communication', but this is such a large issue that few organisations really understand how it works. As a result, any attempts to improve it through benchmarking tend to be unsuccessful. It is far better to concentrate on a more manageable subsection of the area, for example how an organisation gets feedback from its staff.

It is important to identify the critical success factors in the overall service you provide and to establish how well you deliver them.

Ask your customers – both internal and external – the following questions.

- What are the most important aspects of the service?
- What do you need from the service?
- How well do we meet your needs?
- What works well about the service?
- What doesn't work well?

Organisational priorities must obviously be taken into consideration when considering which areas to benchmark. There is little point in using scarce resources on a benchmarking project to improve a process that is not key to the organisation. However, it might be worth considering a slightly less important but more manageable area for your first benchmarking project. This will make it easier for staff to use what might initially be an unfamiliar management tool.

Resources available to you

There are several useful tools for you to use when deciding what to benchmark.

- Pareto analysis: the theory behind Pareto analysis is that 80% of problems result from 20% of causes. The Pareto method allows you to analyse the processes that cause your customers problems and to focus on ways of improving those processes that make the biggest difference to service delivery.
- Staff satisfaction surveys and staff suggestion schemes can also indicate what processes are causing problems for your internal customers.
- Self-assessment can give you a good starting point for identifying areas to be addressed, as can inspection reports.
- For a more process-driven perspective, it is a good idea to use a holistic assessment tool such as Learning PROBE or the Excellence Model.

The process owner

Benchmarking should lead to a better understanding of processes. This will inevitably involve process change, so it is essential to involve the 'process owner' at the outset of the benchmarking project. The process owner will usually be a manager.

Scope

Once you have chosen the project area, make sure that you are clear about its scope. It is easy for the scope to become a wish list for solving every problem in the organisation. However, the more focused you are about the scope of the project, the more likely you are to succeed. Be clear about the boundaries of the process you are looking at: where does it start and where does it finish?

Define the scope in writing before you decide who will be included on the benchmarking project team. It can always be revised at a later date.

The more focused you are about the scope of the project, the more likely you are to succeed.

Who to involve

Benchmarking is most successful when it involves staff from all levels of the organisation. The varying perspectives of staff at different levels can greatly enhance knowledge of the process and so improve the effectiveness of benchmarking projects. Use the process owner to help identify the right people for the project. Team membership should ideally represent front-line service delivery staff and managers, but avoid making the team too large as the advantages of breadth of knowledge will be countered by the detrimental effect of project management by committee. Aim for between four and six people, though smaller teams of two or three can be successful, provided that they have support from other members of staff if necessary.

A lack of project work experience should not be seen as an obstacle to taking part. Be willing to provide training for team members, to ensure that they can contribute fully to the project. Basic training in quality tools and problem-solving should be available to anyone who needs it.

For the team to work effectively, front-line staff should feel confident enough to express their opinions in front of other team members. Bear in mind that staff can be reticent about speaking out in front of managers during brainstorming sessions. Always make sure that the confidentiality of the session is agreed before starting and avoid letting managers facilitate the brainstorming.

Understanding the existing process

Before using benchmarking to learn from other peoples' systems, you must first understand your own processes. Some learning providers have well-documented processes, but even if your organisation has written procedures, it is worth flowcharting the process being benchmarked. If you do not have a written procedure, it is vital to flowchart the process.

Flowcharting identifies:

- each stage in a process
- the links between each stage
- the inputs and outputs of each stage.

It is an excellent way for a team to learn about a process and to understand its strengths and weaknesses. The graphic representation can often highlight issues that staff were not aware of before.

The best way of developing a flowchart is for the people who are actually involved in the process to construct it. Assemble a cross-section of such staff, supported by a facilitator who is not involved in the process in any way. This gives the facilitator the freedom to ask the 'idiot' questions, such as 'Why do we do this?', 'Who is responsible?' and 'What is this for?'.

Use wipe boards or Post-it notes for the initial flowchart diagrams, as there will inevitably be a number of revisions as staff realise that they have missed out stages of the process.

Process gaps

Once you have mapped the process on a flowchart, find out whether it meets the needs of the process customers – other staff, learners or external agencies, for example.

A number of sources of information may well already be available to you – learner and staff satisfaction surveys, suggestion schemes, complaints and staff meetings.

There are also usually a number of performance indicators that you can use as a starting point, for example:

- **quality performance measures**, including complaint levels, achievement rates and retention rates
- **financial performance measures**, including staff costs and resource costs
- **time-based measures**, including response times for information and the queue time for enrolment.

It is surprising how much information can be obtained from basic analysis. Sometimes a simple cross-referencing of complaints against the flowchart will immediately identify process gaps that are causing major problems. The critical gaps should form the basis of the benchmarking project. This does not mean that other areas should be excluded, but if these process gaps are not addressed the process will continue to fail, even if it is improved in other ways.

What information do you need?

By this stage you should have a good understanding of the process and its shortfalls. The next stage is to decide what information you need.

- Call a meeting of the benchmarking team, to confirm the gaps identified and to agree the information you need to obtain.
- Be concise. It is easy to be swamped with too much information – to fall into the trap of 'paralysis by analysis'.
- Draft a provisional list of questions for a benchmarking partner.

Devising your questionnaire

The following list of questions can be applied to most process benchmarking projects and to most organisations, regardless of their sector. It might help you in devising your own questionnaire.

- What is your process?
- Is there a documented description or flowchart of the process?
- What process measurements do you use?
- What are the current measurement results?
- What aspects of the process work well?
- What problems do you have with the process?
- What improvements have you made to the process?
- Is there any other information you feel might be helpful to us?

It is a good idea to pilot the questionnaire before sending it to your benchmarking partner. Show it to staff from within and outside the process and, if possible, to people outside your organisation. This will help to ensure that you have covered all the information you are likely to need and to highlight any jargon. Ask people to answer the questions on the pilot questionnaire, even if the answers give simulated information, so that you can make sure that you are able to analyse likely responses.

Choosing a benchmarking partner

The next step is to find a benchmarking partner. It is important to identify a benchmarking partner who can give you information that will help you to improve your processes, rather than information that is merely interesting to those who are taking part. The partner chosen does not have to be the best at everything in the sector; aim for one who is best at the process being benchmarked.

The choice of partner is key to the success of the benchmarking project. It is not necessary to choose a learning provider that is very similar to you; it is not always even necessary to use a learning provider at all. Although a learning provider of comparable size and learner intake is more likely to understand the problems and constraints that you experience, there may be issues of competition and confidentiality.

Many organisations successfully use benchmarking projects to improve processes by identifying partners from outside their own sector – a major computer manufacturer with a cosmetics company, for example, or a housing organisation with a national airline. Until you gain some benchmarking experience, however, it is probably better to begin with an organisation in the same sector.

Before making a decision, consider a number of questions.

- Is there a potential internal partner in another department or on another site?
- Is there a similar process that is being better applied in another learning provider?
- Is the process education-specific or more generic?
- Is the process a sensitive one?
- Is the project likely to involve financially sensitive information?

A number of resources are available to help you identify a potential partner:

- local support groups
- national and local benchmarking clubs
- the LSDA benchmarking database (see Appendix 2).

Draw up a list of potential partners and decide the order in which you will approach them.

First contact

'Benchmarking' means many things to many people, so when you first contact your potential partner try to find out the name of someone who is likely to have a similar understanding to yourself. Quality managers can often put you in touch with the right individual, even if they personally will not be the main contact for the project. The quality manager can also save you time by explaining the proposed process to their colleagues on your behalf and getting their cooperation.

If possible, speak to the named contact first, then send a letter explaining the scope of the project and the potential benefits to both organisations. Make it clear that you see benchmarking as a partnership project and that, as such, there will be an exchange of information, rather than a one-way information flow.

It is helpful to include a summary of the information that you will be seeking from them. This gives the organisation a better idea of the best person for you to work with and also avoids the possible embarrassment of your requests for information being refused on the day of the visit.

Do not be put off if you have to approach a number of organisations before finding one that agrees to work with you.

Before the visit

Once you have agreed to go ahead, it is important for you to make sure that both parties understand the scope and restrictions of the project. Send a code of conduct agreement (see the sample code of conduct on page 22) to the partner organisation. Include a copy of your finalised questionnaire, a list of any materials that you want to share and a copy of your flowchart.

Ask the partner organisation if you can pre-book meetings with relevant staff to talk to during your visit. The best way to learn how a process works is to talk directly to the people involved in it.

The best way to learn how a process works is to talk directly to the people involved in it.

Your benchmarking team should meet before the visit, to finalise who will take part and to agree the responsibilities of each person attending. Take into account the process knowledge base of your team. Do not swamp the partner organisation with visitors.

Make sure that there are sufficient copies of all documents required for the visit.

During the visit

Basic rules of professional courtesy should be observed when conducting a benchmarking visit:

- be professional, honest, courteous and prompt
- introduce all attendees and explain why they are present
- stick to the agenda
- avoid using jargon
- be sure that neither party is sharing proprietary or confidential information unless prior approval has been obtained
- share information about your own process and, if asked, consider sharing study results
- offer to facilitate a future reciprocal visit
- conclude meetings and visits on schedule
- thank your benchmarking partner for sharing their process.

Approach the visit in a systematic manner. Don't feel uncomfortable about asking the same question a number of times to different people at the organisation – a few different versions of the answer can give you the whole story. Be open-minded. Be prepared to be surprised.

Collating and analysing the information

Arrange a meeting of the entire benchmarking team as soon as possible after the visit, to share all of the information gathered. This is particularly important if the team had been split into groups during the visit and team members had met different people.

At the meeting:

- decide whether any additional information is required and how to obtain it
- ensure that any additional information requested by the benchmarking partner is provided
- if necessary, assign one person to collate all the information.

The team needs to identify whether the benchmarking partner is in reality producing better results than your own organisation and, if so, how. Bear in mind that wholesale transfer of another organisation's processes rarely works.

It is important to **identify** the aspects that enable the good results, **adapt** them and then **adopt** them. Ask yourselves the following questions.

- What performance measures can we use?
- Are they comparable to the partner organisation's performance indicators? (Remember that different organisations measure results in different ways.)
- What is the gap between our performance and their performance?
- If their results are better, then how much better?
- What aspect of the process is producing these results?
- Do their process costs justify the improvement?
- What aspects of the process can we adapt?
- How can we adopt the changes?

If the team decides that generally the results are not much better than your own, they should then consider whether **aspects** of the partner's process **do** work better.

Code of conduct

For process benchmarking to be successful, both partners must be open and honest. As a result, process benchmarking can often involve access to sensitive information. The best way to overcome difficulties and to promote an open exchange is for both parties to agree to a code of conduct.

The following sample code of conduct is based on the European Benchmarking Code of Conduct.

Sample code of conduct

Preparation

- Demonstrate commitment by being prepared before making an initial benchmarking contact.
- Make the most of your benchmarking partner's time by being fully prepared for each meeting.
- Help your benchmarking partners prepare by providing them with a questionnaire and an agenda prior to benchmarking visits.

Contact

- Respect the culture of partner organisations and work within mutually agreed procedures.
- Use the preferred contact(s) designated by the partner organisation.
- Agree how far communication or responsibility is to be delegated in the course of the benchmarking exercise. Check mutual understanding.
- Obtain an individual's permission before providing their name in response to a contact request.

Exchange

- Be willing to provide **to** your benchmarking partner the same type and level of information that you request **from** your benchmarking partner.
- Clarify expectations and avoid misunderstanding by establishing the scope of the project as early as possible.
- Be honest.

Confidentiality

- Treat benchmarking **findings** as confidential to the individuals and organisations involved. Such information must not be communicated to third parties without prior consent. Make sure that you specify clearly what information is to be shared, and with whom.
- An organisation's **participation** in a study is confidential and should not be communicated externally without their prior permission.

Use of information

- Use information obtained through benchmarking only for purposes stated and agreed with the benchmarking partner.
- The use or communication of a benchmarking partner's name with the data obtained or the practices observed requires the prior permission of that partner.
- Contact lists or other contact information provided by benchmarking networks or databases will only be used for benchmarking.

Legality

- If there is any potential question on the legality of an activity, you should take legal advice.
- Avoid discussions or actions that could lead to or imply anti-competitive practices. Don't discuss your pricing policy with competitors.
- Do not obtain information by any means that could be interpreted as improper.
- Do not disclose or use any confidential information that may have been obtained through improper means, or that was disclosed by another in violation of duty of confidentiality.
- Do not pass on benchmarking findings to another organisation without first getting the permission of your benchmarking partner and without first ensuring that the data is appropriately anonymous so that the participants' identities are protected.

Completion

- Follow through each commitment made to your benchmarking partner in a timely manner.
- Try to complete each benchmarking project to the satisfaction of all benchmarking partners.

Understanding and agreement

- Understand how your benchmarking partner would like to be treated, and treat them in that way.
- Agree how your partner expects you to use the information provided, and do not use it in any way that would break that agreement.

Analysing and planning

Once all the information has been collated from a benchmarking exercise, the organisation needs to devise a way of translating what has been learnt into improvement. At this stage the advantages of having a balanced team become most apparent.

Be creative when looking at how best to improve the processes; use brainstorming to identify solutions and involve all of the team in the decision-making. The project manager should consider whether additional skills are required to support the planning, development and management of the improvements and process of implementation.

Make a timetabled plan for implementation and ensure that sufficient resources are available to implement changes. Use the benchmarking champion to ensure that additional resources are in place and that there is continued senior management support.

Common causes of failure

Unfortunately, many benchmarking projects fail. This is usually due to cutting corners and treating the project as an exercise in 'industrial tourism', instead of as a systematic project-based process.

The main reasons for failure are:

- **the wrong process is chosen for the project**
  - the project is not a critical process – resources are diverted into looking at something that is not linked to business priorities or to customer and stakeholder needs
  - the project is too large
  - the project is not focused
- **lack of management support**
  - management support is not gained at the start of the project
  - there is no senior champion
  - management support is lost during the process
  - there are insufficient resources for the project

- **process stakeholders are not involved**
  - the process owner is not involved or enthused
  - the team is unrepresentative, with no front-line staff
- **the process is not understood**
  - the process is not properly mapped
  - the map shows what **should** happen, not what **does** happen
  - customer needs are not understood
  - there are insufficient or inaccurate measurements of the process
- **communication failure**
  - staff are suspicious of the reasons behind the project
  - the findings are not written up
  - findings are not communicated to the organisation
  - staff are not brought on board with the need for change
- **planning and implementation problems**
  - the project is not planned systematically
  - the implementation of proposed changes is not planned.

Making changes

Whatever type of benchmarking is used, it should lead to improvement. However, change, even change for the better, is often met with resistance.

Before attempting to implement changes, identify any barriers to change that may exist. Analyse likely causes of resistance to change and the likely drivers for change among staff and management at the organisation.

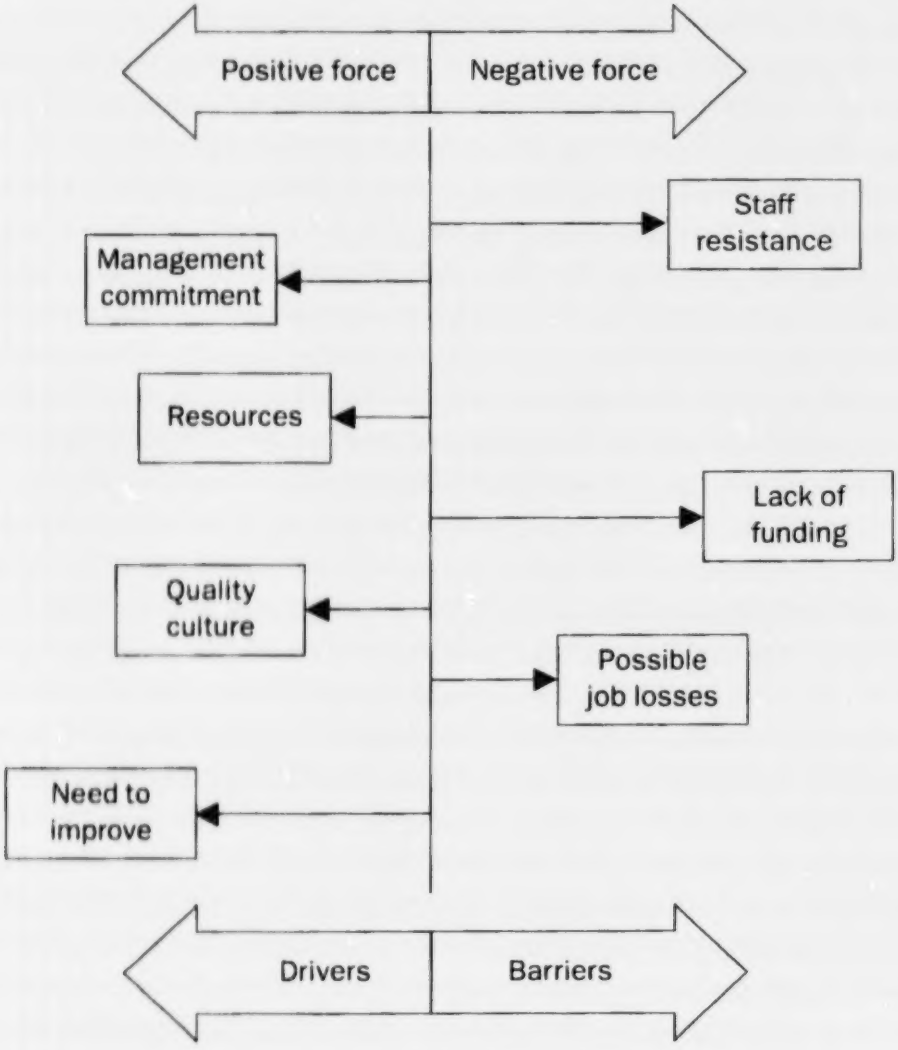
Most resistance to change is a result of fear – whether or not the fear is rational. Consider whether, as a result of the changes being proposed, staff are likely to fear loss of:

- control
- job
- resources
- status.

If so, then it is best to address these fears before making changes. Using project teams that include staff at all levels will help to offset many of these fears. Including staff who will be affected by the changes in planning the implementation will also reduce the barriers.

The following force field diagram shows some of the most probable positive and negative forces.

Forcefield diagram showing the drivers and barriers when implementing change in an organisation



Communication is key. Be prepared to explain:

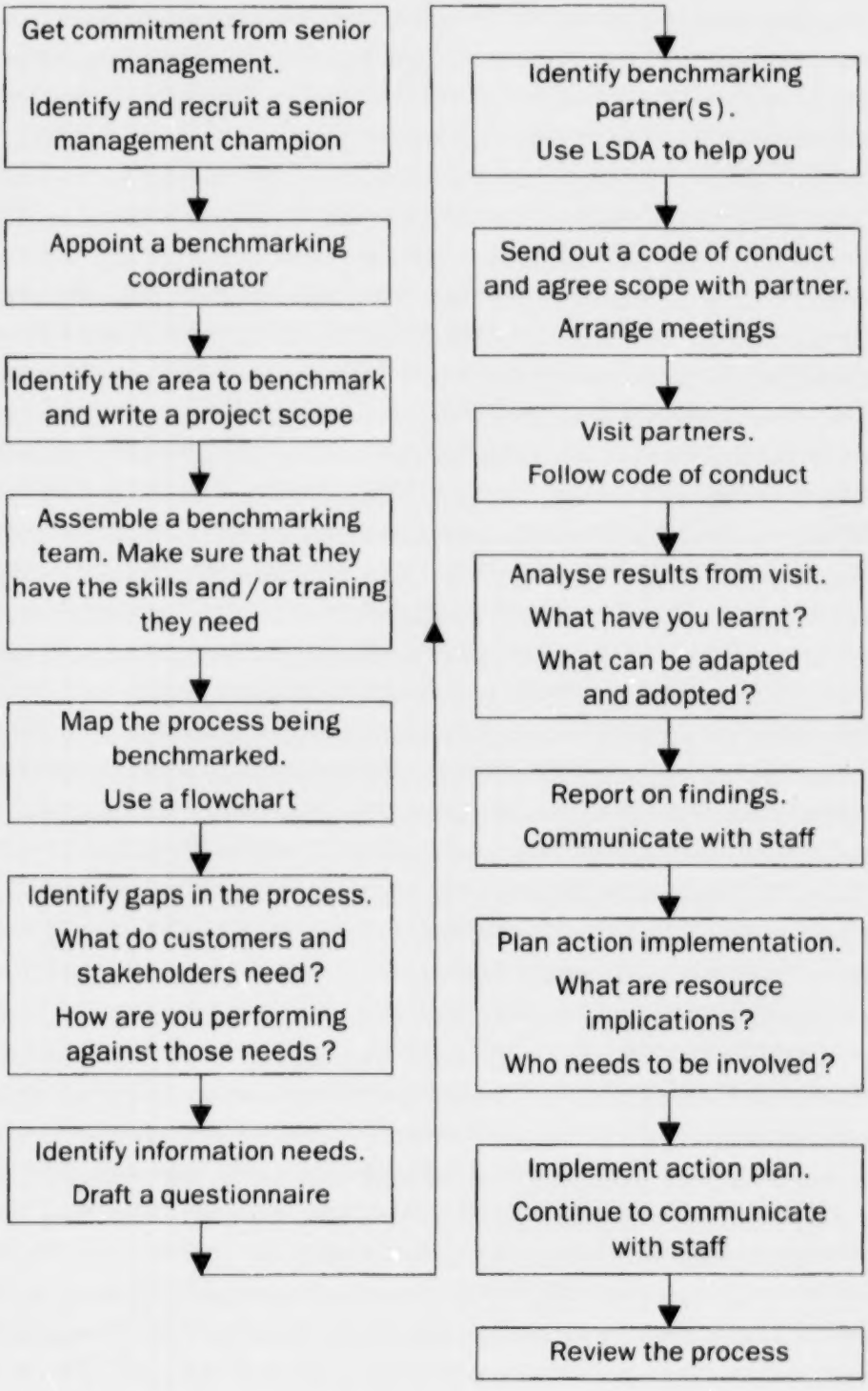
- why change is necessary
- what the recommendations are
- what it will cost and what the cost benefit is
- what other benefits will result from the changes.

Communication is the most important part of any change process. Communicate the results of the benchmarking project to all staff and explain why it is necessary to make changes.

Review

Implementation is not the end of the process. Review the new process regularly. Ask whether the changes are delivering the improvements you expected. If not, why not? Additional changes could be needed. Even if the process is delivering improvements, there is no reason why it should not be benchmarked again at a later date.

Process benchmarking steps: summary


Get commitment from senior management.
Identify and recruit a senior management champion
Appoint a benchmarking coordinator
Identify the area to benchmark and write a project scope
Assemble a benchmarking team. Make sure that they have the skills and / or training they need
Map the process being benchmarked.
Use a flowchart
Identify gaps in the process.
What do customers and stakeholders need?
How are you performing against those needs?
Identify information needs.
Draft a questionnaire
Identify benchmarking partner(s).
Use LSDA to help you
Send out a code of conduct and agree scope with partner.
Arrange meetings
Visit partners.
Follow code of conduct
Analyse results from visit.
What have you learnt?
What can be adapted and adopted?
Report on findings.
Communicate with staff
Plan action implementation.
What are resource implications?
Who needs to be involved?
Implement action plan.
Continue to communicate with staff
Review the process

Appendix 1 The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme

The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme (RQA Programme) is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.

- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The RQA Programme is funded by a grant from the Learning and Skills Council.

The RQA Programme covers a number of areas.

- **Quality information and advice service for colleges** a front-line information, advice and support helpline for colleges, backed by packs on good practice and run for the RQA Programme by the Association of Colleges
- **Information and advice for work-based learning** a front-line information, advice and support helpline for work-based learning providers, backed by packs on good practice and run for the RQA Programme by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion
- **Quality improvement** regional networks and onsite support for providers on developing and implementing quality improvements
- **Benchmarking and information** help for managers to benchmark activities, improve processes and make better use of their own data
- **Development projects** college and work-based learning providers' projects on strategies to improve retention and achievement
- **Leadership for achievement** help for governors and boards, training managers and team leaders to improve learners' achievement and the quality of provision
- **Sharing effective practice** regional practitioner networks and partnership activities to develop and promote good practice in cross-college and curriculum areas.

For further information contact the RQA Programme Manager, LSDA, tel 020 7297 9082 or visit the website www.rqa.org.uk

Appendix 2 LSDA benchmarking database

The LSDA benchmarking database is a service being developed for learning providers to help them identify benchmarking partners. It lists learning providers that are willing to act as partners and any of their areas or processes that they consider to be examples of good practice.

If no suitable learning providers are available, LSDA will try to match your requirements with non-listed learning providers or other organisations.

For further information contact Jane Owen, RQA Programme, LSDA, tel 020 7927 9083.

Appendix 3 Useful websites

www.chartermark.gov.uk
Charter Mark

This site gives details of Charter Mark criteria and has background information on some organisations that have applied for the award.

www.dti.gov.uk
DTI (Department of Trade and Industry)

The site has lots of useful information on quality issues and general management theory. There is also access to a number of useful downloadable publications.

www.efqm.org
EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management)

This site gives background information on the EFQM, details of the Quality Model, and explains how to apply for the award.

www.iqa.org
IQA (Institute of Quality Assurance)

The site gives details of the Institute and the services it offers.

www.LSDA.org.uk
LSDA (Learning and Skills Development Agency)

The site shows all the support available from LSDA. There is also access to a considerable number of downloadable publications.

www.qualityACL.org.uk
Adult and Community Learning Quality Support Programme

An LSDA and NIACE site including staff development guides, back-up materials from workshops, case studies, news and views.

www.rqa.org.uk
RQA (Raising Quality and Achievement)

The RQA site lists details of the support available to the sector from the benchmarking and information strand and from each of the other strands within the programme.

raising quality
and achievement
programme

Benchmarking – or 'the art of stealing shamelessly' – is a way of making the most of others' expertise. By comparing your own processes and practices with another's, you can identify what should be improved, find ways of making those improvements and then implement them. At LSDA, the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme facilitates and supports this work.

This booklet is an introduction to benchmarking in the learning sector. It explains the principles and practices of benchmarking for learning providers, describing the three main benchmarking techniques.

Its simple step-by-step guide to process benchmarking – from deciding what to benchmark, through choosing a benchmarking partner, to carrying out benchmarking visits, analysing results and making changes – will enable learning providers to use this valuable management tool. In so doing, they will be better able to meet the demands for continuous improvement of their customers and stakeholders.

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